

PROLOGUE



Guten Morgen,” boomed the resonant baritone of my father, as he greeted his brother-in-law, Oskar, who was entering the steel factory below my window. *“Ja, Mendel,”* replied my uncle, and his voice suddenly dropped to a whisper. I climbed out of bed and looked over at my sister, Judith (I call her Dita), crouched in the corner. Her eyes were red. Why had she been crying again? I leaned out the window and strained to hear the hushed words between Papa and Uncle Oskar.

A clutch of fear erupted in my tummy when I saw Papa’s expression. Why was he so afraid? Mama appeared in the doorway of our bedroom, her face inscrutable, and her lips a tight, grim line.

“Hurry girls, get dressed. We have to go into the attic for a while.”

Dita began to whimper. *“Shush,”* hissed Mama. *“Crying will do no good. We must be quiet.”*

Why did we have to hide in the attic again? I was scared. I heard the word Jewish, Jewish. What did it mean? Are we Jewish; are we bad? What did we do, I wondered? But I knew better than to ask questions then. I did not say a word. I knew to be silent. I was six years

The Dr. Erica Miller Story: From Trauma to Triumph

**old and had no idea how our lives would change that day
in 1940 in Rumania.**

PART I
RUMANIA 1933-1949

ERICA:
A TRAGICALLY BRIEF CHILDHOOD



German is my mother tongue, and Rumania is my birthplace, but I had to leave both behind quite early in life.

I was born on November 10, 1933, in Tshernovitz, Bukovina, a province in Rumania. The area had been part of Austria when my parents were young; hence my mother tongue was German. Later it became Rumania, then Moldavia, and now it is called the Ukraine. I had one sister, Judith, or Dita as we called her, who was four-and-a-half years older than I.

My father, Emmanuel Gelber (Mendy), son of Eta and Julius Gelber, was a tall, handsome man, popular with the ladies. He was smart, well-read, and artistic. He cut quite a figure strolling down the Morgenbessergasse, the narrow street leading to our home. My mother's older brother, Oskar, said to my father one day, "*Mendel, you are going to marry my sister, Fani. She's a virgin and you'll get a big trousseau.*" So Mendel married Fani Turkfeld, a rich girl who was smart but uneducated. It was time for her to marry. She was already pushing twenty, considered old for that time.

According to my mother, the marriage was a good one for a few years until he started to fool around. According

to my father, my mother had a vivid imagination and the marriage was fine. What I think and what I know is that they were mismatched but did the best they could. By my standards, they had a loveless, yet functional relationship.

We had family dinners, holidays, and vacations together. As a child, I never witnessed abuse or disrespect between my parents. They took care of each other and us. We were a family!

FAMILY

Three of my grandparents died before I was born. The only one I knew was my father's mother, Eta Gelber, and by the time I was born, she was deaf and blind and in her eighties. When we visited her on Sundays, she was invariably lying in bed: gray and nearly immobile with vacant milky eyes and a musty smell from aging organs. She would reach out and touch me to "see" who was there. To say I hated those weekly visits is an understatement. She died when I was about four years old.

My father's father, Julius Gelber, was a teacher, which was unusual at that time. Most people were uneducated, and many were merchants. It was prestigious to be a teacher. I don't know exactly what he taught—probably the Talmud or some other Jewish subject. The family had no money, but combined a deep love for learning with a persistent motivation to get ahead. My determination to achieve an education, my intense interest in seeking knowledge and aca-

demia must have come through my father's side.

My mother's parents, Yetta and Samuel Turkfeld, were uneducated, yet they made a good living from their owner-operated steel factory. Owning your own business, especially in the line of blue-collar work, was unheard of for Jews of that era. My aptitude and interest in seeking out entrepreneurial business ventures definitely were transmitted to me from my mother's genetic pool of traits.

I view the legacy of my forty-six genes as precious ancestral treasures gifted to me, only me, and no other. What a humbling thought it is to be uniquely woven in as part of a never-ending chain of links to my past and future.

The family steel business was on the first floor, and my aunts, uncles, cousins, and our family lived on the second. I remember sneaking into the work area of the factory (as children we were prohibited from going there) and walking down the narrow aisle. I could hear the grind of the welding and see the sparks flying as the steel was being foundered. I dared to disobey. My curiosity superseded the potential consequences. I liked the rush and excitement I felt pushing through the doors close to me. Warnings and punishments by my elders failed to rein in my adventurous nature. I walked to the beat of my own drums. I still do.

My grandfather, Sam, ran the factory with three of his sons, and my grandmother, Yetta, was doing what women were supposed to do: remain "barefoot and pregnant" in the kitchen, cooking and cleaning.

My grandmother was a short, skinny, hard-working,

serious woman. She never smiled. I assume she did not have a muscle to spare. She was probably overworked and underappreciated. Twelve kids and a husband—can you imagine that? I can't.

Among her many children, Yetta's firstborn daughter, Gusta, married young and moved to South America, leaving Fani (my mother), the only other girl, to help Yetta care for the men and the household.

When my mother was born, there was little room for her in the house, so they put her cradle under the table. In many ways, Fani never completely "got out from under" the narrow and limited space of her lifelong existence. She was always just an extension of everyone else.

Fani was allowed to attend school just on Saturdays since she was the only girl left to help her mother with chores. Week in, week out, every Saturday, dressed in her one and only dress, Fani went to school with trepidation. The kids would point a finger at her and laugh, "*It must be Saturday. Here comes Fani always wearing the same dress.*"

In spite of the humiliation and mockery from her peers, Fani feasted off the crumbs of education as best she could. Throughout her life, she remained hungry for knowledge and embarrassed by her scribbled handwriting and her limited literacy.

Unfortunately for her, she was a prisoner of her times. She never evolved. She was not able to push the envelope. I, my mother's daughter, was able to break through and go beyond the traditional narrow-mindedness of gender limitation.

“Are you proud of me, Mama? I did what you couldn’t do for both of us!”

Don’t tell me that because I’m a girl, I cannot climb a tree or swim in the sea like the boys do. Don’t tell me that because I’m a woman I cannot have a family and a thriving career as well. Don’t tell me to rein in my adventurous nature because I’m a woman.

Mama, do you hear me? Are you proud of me?”

Praise from my mother, no matter how hard I tried and how much I deserved it, would never reach my hungry ears, then or ever. Yet, I know she loved me; she loved me very much. I did not know it then, but I knew it later.

My mother never received affection from her mother, who perhaps was just too busy to show any. In turn, my mother was not demonstrative at all to her husband or daughters. I used to beg my mother for affection. *“Mama, please give me a kiss. Give me a hug.”* But she’d shoo me away. *“No, no, go away. I’m busy.”* I would persist, *“Mama, did I do anything wrong?”* She’d turn away, *“No, no, go away.”* She was not a person of many words. She was shy and inhibited.

On the other hand, Papa was affectionate. He was also emotional and had a temper, a trait I share. When the outburst was over, it was over. He did not carry a grudge. I wish I could say the same about my mother. She was weighted down by a deep barrel of grudges, which never saw the light of day. Her silence spoke volumes.

My father was a self-proclaimed artist and poet. As far

back as I remember he always doodled. I have some of his paintings proudly displayed in my home. He used to write poetry as well. He was often the life of the party; everybody liked him. He was articulate, handsome, and always immaculately dressed. My mother, on the other hand, though good-looking paid little attention to her appearance and grooming. She was quiet like a mouse and never had much to say. In fact, she barely spoke the language of the land—whether Rumanian, Hebrew or English. She spoke only German. She expressed herself through her children. I was always proud of my father and embarrassed by my mother.

In retrospect, I can see that my father was a flawed person and my mother was a model of kindness, loyalty, and devotion to her family. My strong attachment to my children mimics hers. However, unlike my mother and luckily for my children, although I love being with them, I have a full and exciting life apart from them as well.

Early in their marriage, Papa was attentive to Mama. He shared his day at work and read newspapers to her to keep her informed. When Papa got tired of the one-sided communication and stopped sharing his life with her, she felt abandoned and very lonely.

Eventually, the marriage deteriorated. Papa kept growing, and she “stayed under the table,” just as her cradle had been when she was an infant. She would watch his every move and accuse him of straying. He couldn’t go out and buy a pack of cigarettes without her following him. The honeymoon was definitely over.

Erica: A Tragically Brief Childhood



Samuel Turkfeld



Yetta Turkfeld



My Mother—Fani Turkfeld



My Father—Mendy Gelber



*My Mother—
Fani Turkfeld Gelber*

The Dr. Erica Miller Story: From Trauma to Triumph



*Our compound (housefactory) in Tshernovitz, Romania
where I spent my first 7 years*



*My Family— About 1937
L to R: Judith (Dita), my father Emmanuel (Mendy) Gelber,
myself (age 4), my Mother Fani Turkfeld Gelber*

EARLIEST MEMORIES

I was seven years old when my world as I knew it fell apart. It was 1941. German soldiers were everywhere. Something scary was going on, but I did not know what. My memories prior to that point are scant, bits and pieces here and there.

The trauma of my war experiences impaired the road to my memory lanes prior to, during, and in the years after that horrific time. Some of my recollections prior to the war were that of a good life. We used to get dressed up and go for a walk on the Herrengasse (a famous street in Tshernovitz) to the park every Sunday—Papa, Mama, Dita, and I. We have a photo of us strolling along the “Gasse.” I vaguely remember going to the beach on the Prut River and having fun. The factory building, which was my home during my early childhood in the late 1930s, was like a compound. Each of the Turkfeld siblings and their families had a one-bedroom apartment on the second floor of the factory. There was a kitchen/sitting room and the bedroom that my parents shared with my sister, Dita, and me.

Amongst all my extended family who shared our home, my most memorable and favorite aunt was Aunt Olga, who was always baking cookies. Uncle Oskar brought her home from his travels during World War I. She was born Christian. She had left her family behind, embraced Judaism, and became a devout Jew. She scrupulously observed all the

dietary laws and prepared all the holiday meals for the whole Turkfeld clan. Unimaginable and unforgivable, she was referred to as the “Goya” (a derogatory term used for a non-Jewish individual) by some members of our family until the end of her gracious life. Prejudice is, and will always remain, an incurable disease of the feeble-minded.

My five cousins who lived in our compound were an important part of my early life. We had such fun playing games in the backyard. I remember the beautiful lilac tree that grew there. Those were happy times, and I loved that tree. I grow lilac bushes in my own yard in Southern California, and to this day, their sweet scent takes me right back to that idyllic time before the war when I played with my cousins. Even though my lilacs are not as fragrant as I remember them, they are still beautiful and cherished.

My sister had an issue with food. She was chubby and our mother would hide food from her. I, on the other hand, was very skinny, and my mother would try to feed me like a goose. She used to hold me down, pinch my nose closed, and push food into my throat like they did with geese to fatten them up for the holidays. I would rebel, struggling against her, shouting, “*Don’t make me.*” She would ignore me and continue to push food into my throat. The way I got even and fought back was by being contrary, ignoring her, and misbehaving at any opportunity I had, and there were many.

My mother couldn’t get by with spanking me because I learned to hold my breath until I turned blue. Instead,

she pinched me. It really hurt, but I was not about to cry! I showed her!

Only once do I remember my father hitting me on the behind although I don't remember exactly what I did. I had a big mouth and probably said something I shouldn't have. When my father scolded me, I taunted him, "*Go ahead. Hit me all you want. I won't cry.*" He continued to hit me, but I waited until he left the room and then I cried in private. I had black and blue bruises for some time. I'm still like that. When there's a trauma, I do whatever has to be done, detached and purposeful. Then, after the crisis is over, I allow myself to be vulnerable, shake some, and move on.

My mother was fair-skinned and blond as were my sister and all my cousins. Unlike them, my complexion was dark, like my father's.

There were a lot of gypsies in Rumania. People used to tease me that I did not really belong to my family, that I fell off a gypsy wagon, and my parents picked me up and took me in. They called me *Tsigynerin*, gypsy girl.

I always felt different. There was no one who looked like me in the family. I still feel unconnected and separate—walking to the beat of my own drummer, with or without the approval of those close to me.

Dita recalls that our mother used to take her for strolls through the neighborhood, but would leave me behind with the maid because I was ugly. I always wanted to be told that I was pretty. Although I don't remember my

mother's words, I understood that my sister was the pretty one and I was the smart, but unattractive one. As a child and adolescent, it seemed to me that rather than rely on my looks, I would have to prove myself through education—and I did.

NAZI HORRORS



*“I believed I could not survive this and
I indeed survived, but do not ask me how.”*

—A German poet, quoted in Papa’s journal.

(See Appendix.)

TO THE CATTLE CARS

By the time I was six, the political situation in Bukovina had deteriorated into chaos. Rumania had signed a trade agreement with Germany in 1939 followed by several more treaties that placed Rumania under heavy Third Reich influence. Germany ceded parts of Bukovina to the Soviet Union and Bulgaria. Rumania was declared a “National Legionary State,” and democracy essentially disappeared. In that chaos, the right-wing Iron Guard tried to seize power but was defeated. By 1940, Germany had gained more and more influence, and a special intelligence unit began to suppress all dissent. That was the beginning of a policy of persecution and extermination of Jews.

Being hunted like animals is an indelible memory for me. The systematic deportation and extermination of Jews

had begun. We were not spared! One day, the Germans came to our factory unannounced as part of their relentless search in pursuit of prey. I distinctly remember Papa and Mama hurrying us up to the attic of the factory.

There were many of us crammed into the small space of the attic, all huddled together in the dark on the prickly hay. We heard the German soldiers with their menacing, barking dogs coming up the stairs closer and closer. My father's breathing sounded loud and heavy. I sensed his panic. My mother put her hand over my mouth so I would not scream. I was so frightened. I couldn't breathe. My parents knew that if found we would be beaten, herded together, forced into box cars on the train, or shot.

Much later in my life, here in Los Angeles, a friend who was studying to be a cosmetologist suggested giving me a facial. She put a mud mask on my face and suddenly I felt constricted, out of control. I had a flashback to the attic and my mother's hand over my mouth. I tried to calm myself, "*You are not a child; you are not in danger; you are safe; you are okay.*" But to my consternation, I couldn't calm myself. I started to panic. I began to hyperventilate. I called to my friend, "*Eva, Eva, get this mask off of me. Get it off me!*" Quickly she washed it off. Amazing! My adult reassuring thoughts and cognitive abilities of today did not hold up in the face of my traumatic flashback.

Whenever we were given a heads up that the Germans were coming, we repeated the same hiding routine numerous times. I did not understand what was happening—the

grim faces and whispers, “*Germans, Jewish...*” We are Jewish. We have to hide. No one tells me what is going on.

“Mama, why do we have to hide again? Mama, Mama!”

“Stop it, Erica, stop with the questions,” she said.

“But Mama, I don’t want to be Jewish, Jewish, Jewish, Jewish, Mama!”

“For the last time, stop it,” she repeated.

“Papa, Papa!” There was no explanation from him either. He did not hear me. He looked through me. I was invisible. I never saw him like this before. The stress was getting to him. He was falling to pieces in front of my eyes. He could not handle the anxiety of wondering and waiting. He felt humiliated having to crouch in corners like a hunted animal.

He finally declared, *“I cannot tolerate this any longer. We will go voluntarily to the trains rather than hide and wait to be captured.”* He was either completely nuts or incredibly courageous. I can only imagine how difficult it had to be for him to make that decision.

From Papa’s Journal—

“Because I worked for the Russians from May 1940 to July 1941, I was put on the ‘black list.’ A former Christian colleague and friend warned me to quickly disappear. Hearing that the Gestapo was after me, I decided that being deported was the safer way to go. If we continued to hide, it was only a matter of time.”

Thanks to the steel factory's output of product for the war machine, my mother's brothers and their families had permission from the Germans to stay in Tshernovitz. They were lucky they stayed behind and survived. My father's family, on the other hand, suffered a different fate. His brother and family were deported and perished in the camps. I don't know where they were sent. His sister married a Christian, moved to Argentina, and completely cut off ties to the family. My father wrote to her after the war, but she refused to respond. I think she suffered from the Stockholm syndrome.

Once the decision was made to leave, my father found a Rumanian neighbor with a horse and buggy who, for a fee, took us to the cattle cars. We had to leave everything behind except for small bundles of clothes.

As we made our way to the trains, crowds of people swarmed around us as if in a daze, carrying pitifully small packages of belongings just like us. We were forced to leave behind cherished mementos of a lifetime. We each wore two or three sets of clothing, layer upon layer, in a desperate hope to salvage a few things and have some protection from the elements. It was winter time. We looked funny, all puffed up like gigantic stuffed puppets, unrecognizable. My father, my tall handsome father, looked so odd, with his overstuffed arms and chest covered with two shirts, suits, a jacket, and coat. All of us, yes all of us, and those around us wore the required yellow Star of David, which marked us as refuse to get rid of.

At the train station, people were screaming, struggling to stay together and fearful of getting lost. Mother held onto Dita and me for dear life. People were moaning and crying, clinging to each other and hanging onto their children. Some people lost their loved ones and there was much screaming as they desperately sought each other out among the stream of refugees.

Once at the train station, we were pushed onto a cattle car. Papa, Mama, Dita, and I held to each other tightly as we were herded toward the back of the freight car and forced onto the floor. The train was filled to capacity with people. I could hardly breathe. I pushed closer to my mother. People were pushing against each other, too close for comfort, way too close. The train made many stops on the way to the unknown. The steel doors slid open, and in came fresh air and fresh terror.

From Dita's Journal—

“Soldiers with guns would drag out the men and begin hitting them with bayonets. I will never forget my father lying in the filthy mud, holding his arms over his face, trying to shield himself from the senseless blows, the ‘joy’ beatings as they came to be called.”

From Papa's Journal—

“Like cattle, we were beaten with no mercy and driven out of the train. We were thrown to the ground as the perpetrators yelled, ‘Filthy Jews.’”

I remember crouching deep into the corner of the cattle car. Mama was nearly smothering me with her body. I thought, “*It’s a good thing we are in the back. Maybe they won’t get to us and beat us.*” Then the train whistle would blow, and the soldiers would jump off the train until the next stop and another wave of terror. I further remember singing silently to myself, “*Schmutzige Juden, schmutzige Juden*” (Filthy Jews, filthy Jews) over and over again in perfect harmony with the steady repetitive beat of the train tracks—tum tatum... tatum, filthy Jews... filthy Jews... filthy Jews... tatum... tatum... tatum.... At least for a moment I forgot where I was—but just for a moment.

We were sitting on the floor of the cattle car, on top of each other with barely room to move. This experience created for me a deep-seated case of claustrophobia, which never left me. I crave privacy and must always have my own space. Don’t stand too close to me. Don’t intrude on my space. Don’t go through my drawers. Don’t look in my purse. Don’t help yourself to my things. It could not have been easy for my family to understand or comply with my need for privacy.

I don’t know how many days we spent in the cattle cars. From Rumania to the Ukraine where we were being taken is quite a distance. It could have been days or weeks. We made stops to pick up other disheveled refugees. I can still hear the sobbing and wailing inside and outside the train. There was no food, no water, no toilets. We didn’t know anyone else on the train with us

and we couldn't see their faces. They were just faceless strangers sharing the same destiny, being herded away into the unknown, into the abyss.

THE CAMP

After what seemed endless, trying days, the train arrived at the dreaded destination. The detention camp was located in Mogilev, in the province of Transnistria in the Ukraine. The doors slid open. "*Out, out, you filthy Jews!*" the guards shouted. It was winter. Icy rain poured down. There was a sea of mud everywhere. People got separated, lost, and one could hear names being called out everywhere. "*Rifka? Yettel? Jacob? Leo?*"

My mother hung onto my arm tightly, something she continued to do all through her life. I hated it. Even when I was an adult, out on my own, she would hang onto me and call me late at night to make sure I had gotten home safely. I was annoyed with her and wished she would stop needing to know my every move. Looking back, I wish I could have been kinder. She was afraid to lose me. She just wanted to know I was safe.

Once off the trains, we walked and walked to reach the camp. We were covered with layers of mud. We were freezing, wet, filthy, miserable, and terrified. We must have walked a long time because my shoes had holes and the cold mud just seeped through. Under the cover of darkness, Papa stopped at a peasant's house and asked for

water. They closed the door in our faces. The yellow Star of David was the mark of death.

The next day we arrived at a mountain called Pataki. There were Rumanian and German soldiers everywhere, guarding the Rumanian-German camp. Just over the mountain, beyond where we could see, was our camp, so we heard. An eerie silence descended upon the frightened crowd, upon me. Yes I was frightened. I could not see or hear a thing but my heart beating and my stomach growling. The silence surrounding my universe was deafening but not for long. The familiar shouting voices of the guards became louder and louder until they were right on top of me, behind me, in front of me, everywhere. Then suddenly, the soldiers grabbed my father and viciously beat him for no apparent reason. *“Why? Why are they beating Papa? What did he do?”* There were no answers. I remember looking upon my father’s attackers and being immobilized, helpless. There was nothing I could do to help Papa. No child should bear witness to such a degradation of one’s parent. It was fortunate that he was wearing layers upon layers of clothes that prevented serious injury.

Later in life, as a mental health professional, I was able to inspire, empower, and coach the oppressed in their plight against abuse and brutality in their life. Time and time again, I was able to right the wrong done to my father.

In order to get over the mountain, we had to wade through mud and debris. It was slippery and people kept on sliding down the path, unable to make it to the top.

In exchange for jewelry, the soldiers with their long sticks assisted the refugees in getting to their destination. Without pause, the women took off rings and necklaces and handed them over to their tormentors. My mother, though, saved one of her wedding rings by hiding it, probably in her bra. She gave the soldiers the rest of the jewelry she had so the four of us could be helped over the hill. When I think back, I realize my mother was a tough, brave soul whenever she needed to be. I think I emulated her in that as well.

Night had fallen and it was pitch black. Throughout our desperate ranks, a rumor began circulating that some people were being taken to a place from which no one came out alive. The “good place” to reach was the camp in Mogilev. At this news, my father made a risky decision. Quietly, my parents, sister, and I crept out of the ranks, bolted into the darkness and crawled toward a dim light in the distance. We came upon a peasant’s cottage and knocked on the door. The door opened and we could see several families huddled together in one room. Papa immediately said that he had some money. The man grunted his assent, pocketed the rubles, and we found a spot of shelter for the night. Early the next morning before daybreak, we were shaken awake, and told to hurry and get out. Our host didn’t want any trouble.

From Papa’s Journal—

“I recall the horrendous night. My thinking became confused and I started to hallucinate. The small flickering

light in that room became like a fireball; I saw visions of green palms and crested clear waters. I don't know if it was seconds, minutes, or hours later that I woke up abruptly and saw the haggard faces of my wife and children, dressed in their filthy clothes, ready to move on, again into the unknown.”(See Appendix)

The memory of the mud and soaking-wet coldness stays with me to this day! Hour after hour, we trudged forward, willing our feet to take yet another step. Exhausted beyond measure, we finally got to the camp in Mogilev. I don't remember how long it took, but it was a very long time, probably days. Those who had not bolted from the ranks during the night were never heard from again. We also were spared from the terrible typhoid epidemic that had raged through Mogilev, leaving people dead in the streets. As with our ancestors in Egypt, the Angel of Death passed over us. We survived.

In Mogilev, we were shoved into a small space in a building surrounded by barbed wire. We were kept like monkeys in a zoo. There were about fifty people, men, women, and children, in one small room. Each family huddled together in a small space. One old lady moaned and sobbed softly it seemed like the entire time. She had become separated from her family. She had no one to lean on. I will never ever forget the wrenched, contorted features of that face.